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The Accidental Supermom: Superheroines and Maternal Performativity, 1963–1980

LAURA MATTOON D'AMORE

THE NOTION OF THE SUPERMOM IS SYMBOLICALLY RELIANT ON THE idea of the superheroine. The supermom describes women who straddle the public and private spheres, and infers that doing so requires superhuman capacities.[1] Since the superheroine was founded on characteristics of strength and independence, her ideological connection to mothers is empowering. The supermom, the identity construction of the working mother, grew out of the 1970s as a product of both Second-Wave Feminist sensibilities about the capabilities of women (women can do it all!), and a social reality that mandated that even strong, empowered women be "good mothers."[2] Particularly interesting, then, is the revelation that the superheroine subject is inescapably, and traditionally, maternal. During the period 1963–1980, feminists struggled with issues of access and protection for women in the workplace, including the debate about the possibility of combining work and family. An analysis of superhero comics from the same historical period finds that the superheroine's performance of maternity empowers the maternal, accepting motherhood— and the feminized qualities associated with it—as an asset, rather than a liability.

The superheroine was intimately linked, as a symbol and an idea, to American cultural history, making it a particularly suitable icon for the identity struggles of American feminists, and eventually American mothers.[3] In 1972, Wonder Woman's image was adopted as an icon for feminist identity when she appeared on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Ms.* magazine, providing a recognizable persona for a woman who could "have it all," a feminist mantra during the

1970s and into the 1980s. One of the most enduring ways that Wonder Woman, and by extension all superheroines, has affected American cultural identity is by association with the symbol of the supermom. After *Ms.* introduced Wonder Woman's feminist potential, the idea of superheroic capacity—whether in terms of equality with men, or the weight of responsibility that woman could successfully carry—seeped into the rhetoric surrounding the women's movement. "Superwoman," "supermom," and "wonder woman" became terms that implied that women could shoulder immense burdens to work and raise families. The Wonder Woman glorified on the pages of *Ms.* in 1972 fostered identification with struggle, independence, and strength. Even for women who never read a comic book, or saw a screen adaption of a comic book story, the symbol of the superheroine was influential to their lives, by its feminist association as a symbol of personal empowerment.

The superheroine originated in superhero comics in 1941, and in 1954, when the comic book industry came under attack by parents, politicians, and psychologists who deemed comic books unfit for children's consumption, superheroines were implicated alongside all others. Foremost on the agendas of the anti-comics crusade were concerns that gender roles were bent in the stories, allowing characters like Wonder Woman to act out lesbian and sadomasochist fantasies. Comics were deemed, via a series of Senate hearings on delinquency, to promote dangerous and immoral behavior in children.[4] Hollywood had undergone a similar morality attack in previous decades, and had adopted a self-governed Production Code. The comics industry elected to do the same and thus created the Comics Code Authority. The code policed the visual, textual, and thematic content of all comic books published after 1954, and is still active—in diluted form—today.[5] Because of this, superhero comics made after 1954 tended to appease conservative ideology, and gender roles appeared rooted in tradition.

This is where the body of the superheroine becomes contested terrain, simultaneously embodying progressive ideas about women's roles while remaining staunchly characterized as nurturing and maternal. Superheroines were a critical component of superhero comics during the 1960s and 1970s, and they acted out a burgeoning feminist fantasy in their roles as women working in a man's world. As women who worked outside the home in a profession that was

traditionally male, and in which battle with villains was a regular condition of employment, superheroines were a feminist fantasy. There was, undoubtedly, subversiveness in the superheroine, particularly in her relationship to women's rights. As comics historian Bradford Wright noted, "the young individuals who entered the [comics] field after 1968 had been raised on a twin diet of 1960s idealism and Marvel comic books, a cultural pedigree that inspired them to challenge conventions" (234). Inherent in that idealism was rising consciousness of second-wave feminism, of equality between the sexes, and of redefining family and gender roles. However, the backbone of American conservatism during the latter half of the twentieth century was the nuclear family, with a father, a mother, and children, and since there was only one nuclear family constructed in the mainstream superhero comic book universe between 1960–1980 (headed by Reed Richards and Sue Storm in *The Fantastic Four*), comics had to find other means of maintaining a recognizable social order with regard to the gendering of roles.

One of the ways in which the superheroine maintained a semblance of traditional order was via her characterization as maternal. She was protective, nurturing, and she took on domestic roles. Within superhero comics, however, motherhood—the "maternal"—was figurative because only one superheroine had a baby during the two and a half decades following the 1954 implementation of the Comics Code (Invisible Girl, one of four superheroine subjects in this article). The performance of maternity, maternal performativity (based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performance: if it performs it, then it *is* it) is key to understanding how hegemonic, status quo gender roles function in superhero comics. The superheroine both anchored (via the appearance of domesticity) and undermined (by not procreating) hegemony. As political and social consciousness changed throughout the 1960s and 1970s, particularly via liberal social movements such as civil rights and second-wave feminism, superheroines also subtly mirrored those shifts.

The superheroine is a gendered body of contradiction, at once conservative and liberal, traditional and radical. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon note that comic book semantics encourage "multiple interpretations, even ones completely oppositional to any specific artistic intent" (4). In this way, the superheroine is the perfect location for the kind of negotiation of gender roles the

feminist movement contended with during the same time these comics were created. Feminism, civil rights, and a growing dissatisfaction with various politics all found their way onto the pages of comic books, even as the "morality police" were tasked with keeping them at bay. This echoes feminist cultural scholars Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, who argue that popular culture is a site of struggle where meanings of feminism are contested (9). The superheroine was such a site; domesticity, maternity, and gender roles were just a few of the ideologies debated within the pages of superhero comics.

The metaphorical push and pull of work versus family was central to the representation of the superheroine in superhero comic books during the 1970s. The superheroine was placed on a pedestal of achievement, playing with the boys, and developing strength and identity in areas not traditionally available for women. But as females in a majority male universe, symbolically they had nowhere to go except into the roles of women that were recognizable and familiar. For example, superheroes ate, but who cooked their food? Superheroes wore costumes, but who mended them? The unsettled nature of these kinds of questions about work/family balance in the real world carried over onto the pages of superhero comic books. The representational semiotics—which is the symbolic language that transmits meaning via a visual medium—of social change that would signal equality and female power were not yet available (and, in fact, still may not be today), meaning that comic books had to rely on somewhat conservative methods of transmitting information to their young, mass audience. It was because of this that the superheroine translated to a supermom, acting the mother-role and forging intimate connections with feminism and working motherhood as she (accidentally) embodied them.

Theoretically, this analysis can be applied beyond comics, to a variety of representations of female characters in popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s, including those in photography, television, film, and children's literature. The complicated nature of presenting strong female figures, particularly action figures, during a time when the very nature of women's roles in society were being contested and revised, meant that many popular representations of women were somewhat inconsistent. In some ways females were unleashed, allowed to play with the boys, but in other ways they maintain maternal—nurturing, caregiving, conflict resolving—roles. This analysis of

superheroines from 1963–1980 serves as a template for the kind of popular culture analysis that can be applied to female characters of multiple genres.

Invisible Girl

The Fantastic Four first appeared in November 1961, originating with four friends who journeyed to space to thwart the Russians from getting there first. They were overwhelmed by a menacing radiation cloud and their molecular structure was altered, giving each of them superpowers. Early on, this new comic book was enriched by an unprecedented complexity of identity because it depicted normal people forced into superheroism. The skepticism of 1950s rock and roll and rebel films seeped onto the pages, and the characters, at times, resented their powers and their teammates. *The Fantastic Four* creator Stan Lee intended for there to be more realism, and wanted characters to grapple with more intense issues than was evident in Golden Age superhero titles.[6] This style of thinking ushered in the Silver Age, which is defined as the years following the implementation of the Comics Code Authority from 1954–1970. It was a period during which comics—particularly superhero comics—were re-built according to the new standards of behavior and morality imposed by the Code. It lasted until around 1970, when the essence of rebellion against authority that was so contagious in American society spilled over onto the pages of comics, and in their quest to depict more meaningful content about important social issues (like drugs, racism, and domestic violence) some comic books began publishing without the seal of approval. From around 1970–1980, the Bronze Age attempted to define comics for a post-Civil Rights world, where issues of race, ethnicity, and gender were ripe for re-visioning. Intersecting with Civil Rights, Second Wave Feminism, the Vietnam War, and growing political discontent, this time period provided rich context through which to explore a new kind of superhero who engaged and struggled with social upheaval.

Providing realism in a medium historically defined as childish fantasy was particularly elusive in its representation of traditional domesticity. While sexuality was ubiquitous, especially in the eroticized gaze reserved for female characters shown in various levels

of undress, sex itself was not promoted in mainstream superhero comics during the 1960s and 70s—not even through allusion. And so while the "family unit" could have been the most banal representation of reality for the young reader, the process by which superheroes might get there was rarely given reference. When Reed Richards and Susan Storm of *The Fantastic Four* (a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic and Invisible Girl) wed in 1965, they became the first married supercouple in comics. In 1968, with the birth of their son Franklin, they became the first superparents. Placing a superheroine mother (a literal supermom!) in conversation with the historical context surrounding her creation, particularly regarding the contemporary social debates about women's work, domesticity, and child-rearing, illuminates the ways in which gender roles were destabilized within this conservative genre. The superheroine took on the multiple personalities of the composite American woman—both feminist and domestic, equal and dependent, worker and mother.

Being the first married supercouple, Reed and Sue had to forge the uncharted path to identity as a superfamily, and there was no discussion about whether or not they would have children. Once Sue was pregnant, however, the problem of what to do with a pregnant superheroine proved cumbersome for *The Fantastic Four*. Invisible Girl was sequestered in a Manhattan penthouse during her pregnancy, sheltered from the realities of the dangerous world outside lest it cause her undue stress (this still during a time when pregnancy was an ailment). She was delicate, a vulnerable treasure that needed protection (*The Fantastic Four* #75, 1968). When the time came, childbirth was characterized as a dangerous mission when doctors realized that the very mutation that gave Sue her power may kill her and the child both. Sue's powerful identity, which permeates her molecular structure, represented a dangerous threat to the traditional family. Sue was genetically incapable of being a traditional wife, because she was biologically extraordinary. The symbolic threat to conservative gender roles was symbolized by her inability to safely deliver her baby. It was Reed—the father, patriarch, and leader of the Fantastic Four—who saved the day and got credit for the successful birth of a healthy baby boy. He undertook an impossible mission to save his wife and child, and overcoming that obstacle formed the central plot of the issue in which the first superbaby is born. Pregnancy and childbirth (the female domain) took second stage to superheroic feats (still

defined by masculinity) in these early days of parenthood. That Reed and Sue's baby was a boy further entrenches the primacy of males in the superhero universe; not unlike societies that perpetuate male hegemony with laws and rituals limiting female births, the masculine domain of *The Fantastic Four* was symbolized in this moment by propagation of an assured male future.[7]

Invisible Girl's representation as a working mother in 1969 mirrored American politics and society during the same time period. During the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970, feminists "agreed upon three central demands: the right to abortion, the right to child care, and equal opportunity in employment and education" (Rosen 92 –93). The women's liberation movement espoused improvements for traditional life (birth control and child care) while also staking claim to uncharted territory (equal opportunity in work and education). Invisible Girl represented an amalgamation of many of these identities: radical feminist in her sublimation of gender barriers in being one quarter of an otherwise all male supergroup; suburban and matronly in her passion for coiffed hair and Elizabeth Taylor-esque glam; employed and independent; and now, pregnant, evocative of motherhood. Her cause—as a supermom—became linked to both traditional and radical feminist goals, as she would soon need childcare while fighting villains.

After a respectable six-issue maternity leave, she rejoined her teammates as an active member of the Fantastic Four. Feminists loudly proclaimed that women deserved equality, particularly in the workplace, and Invisible Girl fulfilled that collective wish. She worked on an all-male team, in a male-dominated profession. But the reality a vast population of would-be-feminists faced was also evident in Invisible Girl's newfound maternity: what to do with the children while the women go to work. Betty Friedan's recommendation, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), that women hire nannies, nurses, and domestic aides was not realistic for many women for whom financial, religious, moral, and social pressures made delivering one's child(ren) over to be raised by "strangers" an unsatisfactory alternative to staying home. Mothers were socially programmed to believe they needed to be there; Letty Pogrebin wrote for *Ms*. in 1973: "In the minds of so many women, motherhood is prescribed; nonmotherhood is deviate … caring for the child is … a shortcut to self respect, maturity, even martyrdom" (48). Childcare was not readily available, affordable

childcare even less so, and the stigma attached to mothers who "chose" to work rather than be homemakers was prevalent. Even presidential rhetoric fueled mother-guilt, when in 1971 President Nixon threw the support of the "vast moral authority of the national government" behind the "family-centered approach" to child rearing in defense of his decision to veto a bill that would institutionalize affordable childcare options (Orth 88). Mothers, trapped under these notions of family and pressures of maternal responsibility for the well-being of their children, were "tortured by guilt when they left children in the care of others, no matter how justified the reasons or how educational for the children" (90).

Invisible Girl's job was what might be termed "essential," and her ability to perform it was uniquely her own. She regularly saves the planet from destruction; if any working mother could be justified in leaving her infant in the care of others, it would be her. When she returned to work, negotiation of these social and emotional boundaries was explored surprisingly carefully.[8] At first, she used the childcare resource that the majority of working women at the time did, which was reliance on family and friends. Teammate Benjamin Grimm's (a.k.a. the Thing) girlfriend, Alicia, cared for the baby (*The Fantastic Four*, #88, 1969) at the Manhattan penthouse. After one such occasion, Sue returned home relieved to find that her baby still remembered her. While Reed, the father, shows that he had been concerned over how *he* would feel about the baby after being away ("I didn't realize how much I'd missed the little imp!"), Sue, the mother, was worried about the baby's acceptance of *her* after being gone ("He still remembers us, darling!"). This articulates the difference between the father, who has the freedom to accept (or not accept) the child, and the mother, who must give herself up for the child's needs. The very language used here—Reed is concerned with the "I" while Sue focuses on "him"—underscores the different standards. The torment, guilt, and insecurity that women feel leaving their children behind while they go to work is palpable. Safety—of the baby and of the parents—became a prevalent theme in the comic book.

In 1975, only 34 percent of women with a youngest child under the age of three worked outside the home.[9] Especially during this period, superheroines challenged those expectations. Doing important work, *men's* work, was a critical feminist undertaking. Furthermore, the very idea of superheroism had, from its inception, been imagined

as male, so any female taking on that role challenged what had become the superhero status quo. In 1968, Stan Lee's own editor's note explained a "mushy moment" for Reed and Sue by imploring: "our costumed cavorters are **men** first, and superheroes **second**!—In fact … aren't we **all**?" (*The Fantastic Four* #73, 1968, 26/6). He gave no notice to the woman in the scene. Despite decades of progress in issues of gender equality, in 2006 comics scholar Peter Coogan defined the superhero as male (30). Superheroines have always been the aside, the marginalized, the coda. As such, Invisible Girl's work was valuable to women. She was particularly symbolic in her quest to find balance between motherhood and work.

As women (and men) adapted to changes in attitude during the early years of women's rights, they faced resistance to the new ways. In *The Fantastic Four* #107 in 1971, Sue sought an egalitarian conversation with Reed about work and family. He was busy with a scientific experiment, and when she demanded to know what was more important than her, he retorted: "Don't go **feminine** on me just now! I haven't the **time**—or the patience" (8/5). The implication that women are inherently unreasonable, insistent, and emotional ("feminine" as critique) echoes the counter-feminist argument that women and men are naturally different, and should take on roles that account for that scientific and social reality—a fitting perspective for Reed-the-scientist. Reed then suggested that Sue leave him alone and go visit their son. His place (the father's place) was at work, while her place (the mother's place) was with the child. This short interchange between husband and wife reaffirmed the hegemonic undercurrent to the central ideology about gender that was perpetuated in superhero comics. However, while Reed represented the patriarchal structure and underlying conservatism, Sue consistently demonstrated (a feminist?) opposition to the status quo.

This was not a behavior that went unpunished. The dangerous position that working mothers force upon their children was foregrounded in 1973, when having lost her nanny in the previous issue (literally, because the nanny disappeared into thin air) Sue brought Franklin with her to work. When a band of enemies called the Frightful Four managed to penetrate Fantastic Four headquarters, she was forced to defend herself in his presence as one villain chides: "We are all **civilized** here, dear lady. We'll allow you a moment to set the child **aside** …" (*The Fantastic Four* #130, 1973, 19/7). She fought all

four attackers for several panels (never underestimate a mother's strength in defending her children!), succumbing only when the promise of Franklin's safety was assured. When the rest of her team-mates, including her husband, freed themselves from their own entrapments to come to her aid, Reed ordered her to leave:

> Reed: "**Sue**! I didn't **free** you so you could get into this **fray**! Grab **Franklin**—and get **out** of here—**now**!!"

> Wizard: "Yes, **do** that, dear lady! Then the odds will be **four** to **three**—and that should be enough for us to win **nicely**, don't you think?"

> Sue: "He's **right**, Reed! The battle is **see-sawing** now—a **straw** could send it **either way**! I **can't** stop fighting—and I **won't**! Besides, our baby's **safer** than you think—behind a **force field** even the Trapster's **paste** can't smash!"

> Reed: "Sue—I'm **ordering** you—keep **out** of this! I won't let the **mother of my child**–" (27/9-28/1-3)

When work and family came head to head, Sue was instantly devalued as a worker in favor of her maternal obligations. While this may seem natural—of course Sue should protect her toddler son!—this was anti-feminist, conservative gender role maintenance at play. While holding her own with four villains as her three male teammates were tied up or knocked out, Invisible Girl also projected an unbreakable force field around Franklin; she could take care of herself.

That it was automatically the mother who was expected to give up work for family was precisely the problem between working mothers and the dominant cultural construction of the American family, specifically with regard to its highly gendered roles. The breadwinner (represented in this situation as the one who stays and fights) has historically been male, while females were the providers of domestic security for children (Williams 25–26). This same way of thinking paved the way to the supermom; as notions of gender and family proved unshakeable, many women found it easier to carry the burden of responsibility for both spheres rather than inflame the conflict that arises when men's roles need to change.

In January 1973, Sue faced that which more than half of all mothers in 1975 were confronted, and realized that she could not "do it all."[10]

The essence of the Feminist Movement resounds in her response to her husband after he demanded that she withdraw from battle:

> Sue: In the heat of battle you didn't think of me as a member of the **team**—not even as a wife—only as the "**mother of your child**!" I won't accept that, Reed. Not **now**—not **ever**! So, until you feel you can treat me as an **equal**, I've made up my **mind**. I'm taking little **Franklin**, and I'm **leaving**! Leaving **you**—leaving the **F.F.**!

> Reed: Good! At least **that** way, our son will get a little **attention**! (31/1–2)

She was too important to be killed in action, and her child must always take precedence over her career. She was needed.

Sue's transformation as a working mom moved through several more cycles during this time period, as full-time worker/part-time mother from 1969–1973, to full-time mother in 1973–74, to part-time worker by 1976. She searched for balance, and tried to find her ideal integration of work and motherhood. There was more at stake for Invisible Girl to find balance between work and family than there was for non-super women, because she *was* her work. Through this transformative process of finding balance, and through the satisfaction that she earned from her multiple roles, Invisible Girl grew into a stronger, more confident woman. With that self-assurance and acceptance of her own maternity, she evolved into an invaluable teammate, staking that claim by defeating the Thing (who is the strongest foe in the group) in hand-to-hand combat. She learned to exercise her invisibility and throw force fields at the same time, which allowed her to remain unseen while also exercising offensive control over others. This was a huge leap in capacity for this supermom. Realizing her potential, Sue smiled: "That means I'll be a more valuable member of the team than ever before." In that same moment she reached for her son, imploring: "Come to mommy, darling …" (*The Fantastic Four* #164, 1975), signaling feminism's "superwoman."

Marvel Girl

With the exception of Invisible Girl, mainstream superheroines were not mothers during the 1960s–70s. But even before Invisible Girl

gave birth to Franklin in 1968, superheroines created during the same time period played familiar motherly roles. Most superheroes belonged—at least part-time—to some kind of group, and within those collectives the characters took on roles that looked a lot like the family unit. *The X-Men* is one such example. Created at the end of 1963, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby sought to bring internal conflict to the characters (as they did with *The Fantastic Four*), as well as engagement with familiar issues. The original grouping was comprised of a band of five misfit teens at a special boarding school in Westchester County run by Professor Charles Xavier. Xavier ("Professor X"), a mutant telepath with extraordinary mind-controlling abilities, gathered the mutant youngsters in order to give them a refuge from prejudice where they could hone their individual skills and learn to appreciate their differences. As teens, the X-Men particularly needed the kind of guidance and boundaries that families provided, and the role of guardian was played alternately by Prof. X, Cyclops (the eldest of the X-Men), and perhaps most anachronistically, the young Jean Grey, a.k.a. Marvel Girl.[11]

Sixties-era feminism defined itself by its difference from the previous generation, by daughters who did not want to be like their mothers (Rosen 37). Some of the early second-wave antagonism toward having children stemmed from the fears of entrapment that children and the limitations of motherhood held over the hopes and dreams of individual women. Ruth Rosen notes, "[w]ith one foot firmly planted in the world of their mothers, daughters of the fifties viscerally feared the constraints experienced by the adult women around them … the ghost haunting these young women wore an apron and lived vicariously through the lives of a husband and children" (38–39). The comic book superheroine forged during the 1960s embodied those internal tensions, shifting between difference, via their genetically altered bodies that possessed superpowers, and sameness, through old habits of domesticity and the maternal role accorded them. Jean Grey was a particularly noteworthy example of this symbolic battle between the gender roles of mothers and daughters, as she struggled to be the epitome of both progress and tradition at the cusp of adulthood. The girl-next-door that everyone could love, Jean Grey simultaneously took on the role of mother to the mutants.

Her maternal position was evident as early as January 1964, when she scolded Cyclops after he openly resented his identity: "**Scott**

Summers! Don't ever let me hear you say that again!" (*The X-Men* #3, 1964, 2/1). Her response placed boundaries on the appropriateness of types of speech, something mothers do in order to maintain ground rules in the home. It also employed a stereotypical maternal device in saying his whole name as both an exclamation and a command. A few pages later she did it again, this time reproving Angel: "**Warren Worthington the Third**!! Must you be such a show-off?" (5/1). While Professor X commanded the team to perform physical feats and cooperate as a super-team, and Cyclops kicked misbehaving teens into submission in the training room, it is Jean Grey who monitored their character. This closely followed the contemporary expectations between male and female, public and private, work and home; while men made sure business was done right, women were the moral guardians of children.

Jean Grey was also the team's link to domesticity, which was distinctly maternal terrain during the 1960s. As the editors note, "[e]ven superior mutants with supernatural powers have to eat dinner the same as we," prepared and served by the motherly Jean (*The X-Men* #6, 1964, 1/1).[12] When one of the boys tried to sneak a bite of pie without using utensils, she teleported it away from him while chastising his bad behavior: "Bobby Drake!! You **know** how Professor X feels about table manners! **Next** time use your fork!" (2/3). Insert "your father" for "Professor X" and there emerges the portrait of a family dinner that millions of American boys might begrudgingly recall with personal detail. She was inarguably trapped in a version of the feminine mystique, whereby even as a working woman she cannot escape the domestic expectation associated with her sex. This foreshadows the stress of split identity that supermoms will feel after another decade or so.

The Freudian childrearing experts of the 1950s and 60s, such as pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock and psychoanalyst Rene Spitz, advised that all the problems children had (from autism to delinquency) were caused by mothers (Eyer 57). With that kind of social pressure pervasive in America, even a fictitious universe of mutant teens needed maternal security at home. As such, Jean was their protector. In back-to-back issues in 1966, she played the mother-hen. When headstrong Angel broke formation to forge ahead on a mission, she cried out: "**Warren**! Be **careful**!" while imploring him to return (*The X-Men* #16, 1966, 14/5). And when Beast refused to stop show-

boating in the hospital while visiting an injured teammate (in fact, he called her a "perspicacious wench") she subdued him: "Very well, young man! I shall hold you in the air **telekinetically** until you promise to settle down and listen to me!" (*The X-Men* #17, 1966, 13/4). She is shown holding him high in the air, hands on her hips, proving her strength as both a team mate (Beast is big and heavy, and here she is lifting him above her head with only her mind!) and as an enforcer of decorum. Her stance is entirely motherly. Punishing disrespectful behavior is a vital maternal role taken on by the super-heroine.

By 1968 Jean's role as the mother to Professor X's father was solidified, as Professor X confided information to her that he withheld from the rest of the X-Men for their own protection. Jean became the guardian of Professor X's secrets, and acts based on "what is best" for the "children," carefully guarding her words:

Angel: **Jean!** But weren't you with the Prof—working on some kind of **hush-hush project**?

Jean: The answer to **that** question, Warren, is… **yes and no**!

Cyclops: And if **that** isn't a typical **woman's answer**—I don't know what **is**! (*The X-Men* #40, 1968, 3/1)

The power that she had over the other X-Men made her morally authoritative, and she was given rights and privileges that they were not. The relationship between Jean and Professor X became reminiscent of the closed-door whispers between husband and wife after the kids go to bed, when discussions about bills and the general welfare of the home took place. When Angel and Iceman took issue with the decisions that were made for them, Jean warned them: "Bobby! Warren! You're **forgetting** yourselves! This is **Professor Xavier** you're talking to!" (*The X-Men* #42, 1968, 2/4). The unspoken warning was that punishment for disobeying rules was doled out by the "father," and the "mother" attempted to mediate the imminent argument. This time the two feisty "children" were essentially grounded, with Jean left to make sure they stayed in the house.

In 1969 Jean divulged that she had developed a new skill: she was now able to locate other mutants telepathically, by using her "cerebral exertions" to tap into their mental faculties. The ability to telepathically locate her "family" was the jackpot maternal superpower,

vicariously fulfilling the wishes of every mother who ever worried about a child's whereabouts or welfare. Not only could she find them, but she could communicate with them to find out if they were safe, or needed help (or threaten punishment if they did not respond to their curfew?). In a special section about the "origin" of the "uncanny X-Men" at the end of issue #57, Jean told the reader: "… please don't be alarmed if you feel strangely **compelled** to pay unusual **attention** to the contents of the following pages! The ability to influence the degree of **concentration** is just **one** of my many **mental powers**!" (17/1). The knack that mothers have for getting their children to obey rules and do chores might have felt an awful lot like mind-control, but this superheroine sported the real skill.

The outward impression of Marvel Girl was arguably feminist. She was part of an all-male team, she overcame her share of villains, and saved her teammates from time to time. She was a respected member of the X-Men, she was smart, witty, attractive—she represented much of what feminists (particularly young, single feminists) might have aspired to in terms of moral and physical attributes. She changed throughout the 1960s as the feminist movement picked up steam, indicated by her style of dress, her outward demeanor, and the diversification of use that became evident as she honed her superpower. The undercurrent, however, remained staunchly conservative. In a house full of males, she takes on the role of the mother. Recognizing maternal performativity in superhero comics that do not overtly represent the traditional family is key to making the claim that they maintain conservative gender roles, especially given their temporal intersection with growing consciousness about women's liberation and the equality of the sexes. Strength and capacity for the superheroine during the 1960s invoked maternity.

Storm

A major conflict within feminism during the 1970s centered on its lack of intuition regarding issues that non-white, working class, and poor women faced.[13] When Betty Friedan argued that suburban housewives were a wasted national resource and urged them to go to work, to fulfill something other than their biological destiny, there were millions of women left out of that conversation; women who

had never enjoyed the "luxury" of having a husband who was the sole (and plentiful) breadwinner, who had never known the numbing boredom associated with cleaning their *own* homes. White middle-class suburban concerns left them unaffected, and many were reluctant to join the movement. African American women felt doubly oppressed and misunderstood, because while their "white sisters" ignored their problems, so did their black men. Women occupied the lowest rungs of black revolutionary organizations, and were told that they were less oppressed than black men. The result was a staggering under-representation of African American women in popular culture and political activism, a veritable invisible population.

When Claremont introduced the new team of X-Men in 1975, the African American Ororo Munroe, nicknamed Storm, was the lone woman (just as Jean Grey was the only female in the original X-Men). Storm complicated the ways that conservative (i.e., white middle-class) gender roles permeated the superheroine's representation, just as African American women asserted themselves into feminist rhetoric during the mid-1970s and demanded changes to a dialogue that was now more than a decade old (Wallace 1978). Storm incorporated diversity with maternity.

When Professor X located Ororo in Africa she was a goddess among tribal people (*Giant Size X-Men*, 1975). They worshipped her, brought offerings to appease her, and begged her for rain. Ororo's mutant strength is that she controls the forces of nature; she beckons and guides them at will. When readers first met her she was topless, her breasts covered by her flowing white hair. She was beautiful, odd, and different. Her eyes were "older than time," she was the embodiment of Mother Nature—pure, innocent, powerful. She invoked *National Geographic*-style imagery, and untamed womanhood that must be taught civility. She did not wear clothes, her hair was unkempt, and she spoke in deliberate (albeit grammatical) sentences, implicating her as primitive and exotic. Her immense power endowed her with the potential to be savage and brutal, but because Storm was going to personify maternity and protection, rather than its opposite —destruction—her association stops short of such allusion.

Professor X offered her "a **world**—and people who may **fear** [her], **hate** [her]—but people who **need** [her] nonetheless" (11/1). What he offered sounded a lot like motherhood, and the love-hate relationship of total dependence between mother and child. He offered her the

chance to mother the world, and she accepted without hesitation. While Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl fit neatly into an argument in which conservatism subtly controls the representation of the super-heroine even during moments of rebelliousness, Storm strained against such neat categorization. As Mother Nature, she existed with-out the fabricated boundaries of nation and religion that serve to define "family" in the Western imagination. Her "family" would be coded as her mutant teammates, but her calling was much broader; she cared about the earth, animals, humans, and mutants. This was a distinctly counter-hegemonic perspective; while her physical repre-sentation would continue to exoticize and problematize the black female body in popular culture, there was something unique and sub-versive about the way that she made maternity all-powerful.

However, there were also dominant forces at play, placing limita-tions on her representation of black femininity. The nickname, Storm, has significant connotations in terms of how African skin has historically been envisioned. The African body in the Western imagi-nation is coded as black, as opposed to the whiteness of non-African skin. Black, in the Manichean tradition, is associated with darkness, and the absence of the purity associated with light; black is tainted, white is pure. A storm in nature brings darkness. It stamps out sun-shine and clouds up clear skies. Storms are powerful forces, often frightening, sometimes deadly. Storm's name is enmeshed with the complexities associated with the forces of nature, and by the significa-tion of darkness.

From a feminist perspective, however, Storm could be construed as a positive identity. Storm's ability to control nature made her an ulti-mate force to be reckoned with. After all, humanity cowers in the wake of Mother Nature—entire species have been wiped out because of her changing will—and Storm is no different. She defeats those whom other X-Men cannot. She can only be overpowered when she is trapped or incapacitated so that she cannot summon the forces of nat-ure. When loose and free she is the most powerful mutant, in terms of raw strength and capacity. That storms are dangerous, frightening, and *female* is a feminist fantasy. And as the black female body has, in Western history, been coded as subordinate to the will and desire of (white) men and women, her identity also legitimates a particu-larly African American female fantasy. Empowering black women, and particularly, black mothers (Storm-as-Mother-Nature) was

unprecedented in mainstream popular culture in 1975. She was betwixt and between conservatism and liberalism, hegemony and subversiveness, patriarchy and feminism. She represented a newly found identity struggling to find her place.

Storm struggled to settle in to "civilized" life; she felt trapped by the manmade world. When flying toward battle she felt "free—of houses, walls, people—of the cages mankind builds to lock himself into… free and happy and alive" (*The X-Men* #96, 1975, 27/1). "Freedom" contained multiple associations for Storm; as a woman she was "free" from the bonds of men; she was "free" as an African American, not bound by a legacy of slavery, and the oppression that so many still faced; she was "free" in the most natural sense during those moments while she remains in flight; and Storm preferred freedom from the restrictive confinement of clothing. Her naked body, frolicking in the rain, was a scene to which the comic book returned regularly.[14] This was partially blatant female objectification—once Marvel stopped relying on the Comics Code Authority for publication approval, artist renderings of female characters got progressively more sexualized. As the only full-time woman on the team at this time, Storm was the obvious choice for objectification. Her association with the exotic, primitive, "natural" world made her an easy target; after all, writers could blame the nakedness on Storm's proclivity to take off her clothes rather than the reader's desire for titillation.

While her body was highly sexualized, Storm herself remains, during this time period, chaste. She had no love interests, nor was she pursued with the kind of adoration and zealousness that were Wonder Woman, Invisible Girl and Jean Grey. Looking at this phenomenon historically, inter-racial relationships were few and far between in mainstream popular culture, and there were only a handful of African American superheroes (none of whom were in *The X-Men*) during the 1970s. The popular cultural representation of black female sexuality had not yet been resolved at the time of Storm's becoming. Since she was maternal—represented as Mother Earth—perhaps it was not surprising that she, like the mammy of Hollywood films from the 1930s –1950s, and advertising's Aunt Jemima, was rendered asexual (Bogle 9). That Storm was restricted sexually while being sexualized proves that the boundaries on black female sexuality in mainstream representations were still largely controlled by old stereotypes and prejudices. Negating her sexuality left open the possibility that she could not be

loved in any sense other than the familial. This was damaging for African American womanhood, as one of the top complaints amongst black feminist thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s was their abandonment by black men, who sought beauty and love from "more beautiful, more sensual" white women specifically because they were too hard, and too strong.

Storm spoke for the women left out of the white-middle class conversation that defined the first years of the women's movement. She defied neat categorization as a working mother in the manner that working motherhood was represented by the media and feminism during the 1970s. Storm echoed generations of African American women, "black [women who] mother … the world" (Berry 115). She echoed trans-continental history and diaspora, reminding the world that there is more to maternity than the mothering of one family.

Conclusion

From 1963–1980, issues of social upheaval that sparked significant changes in the nation, such as feminism and Black pride, also shaped superhero comic books. While much of the surface rhetoric of superhero comic books reflected conservative ideas about the role of women and the traditional family unit, the subtext was much more nuanced, and in some cases even subversive. Within that realm of double-meaning, the comic book supermom evoked the symbolism of yesterday's domesticity—still clinging to contemporary notions of femininity—as well as the liberal ideals of the feminist movement, such as equality in the workplace and re-drawing the boundaries of gender roles. The result was powerful maternity, re-imagining traditionally female roles as strong and authoritative. Rather than seeing maternal qualities as limitations or weaknesses of superheroines, this article argues that they in fact strengthen these characters, allowing them to participate on a more equal playing field with their superhero counterparts.

Notes

1. Merriam-Webster Dictionary: "su·per·mom: an exemplary mother; *also*: a woman who performs the traditional duties of housekeeping and child-rearing while also having a full-time job."

2. For more about the "good mother," see Diane Eyer, *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What's Wrong With Society* (New York: Times Books, 1996); and Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

3. As Lillian Robinson wrote at the beginning of *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (2004), "the quintessence of American popular culture in the twentieth century and beyond" (1).

4. For more information about the controversy surrounding comic books during the early 1950s, and about the implementation of the Comics Code Authority, see Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998), and David Hadju's *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (2008).

5. After 1970, some comic books were published without the seal of approval. In the decades since then, this practice has proliferated. Now, it functions much like a parental warning on music—if comic books are approved by the Comics Code Authority, the moral content is considered fit for children. If not, anything goes!

6. The Golden Age is generally defined as Superman (1939) through Comics Code (1954).

7. Thank you to Professor Marilyn Halter, at Boston University, for pointing out this symbolism, and its cultural parallels.

8. Another boundary that goes unexplored after Invisible Girl becomes a mother is the fact that she continues to be identified as "Girl" even after she marries and becomes a mother. Historically marriage is one of the early steps toward evolving out of girlhood and into womanhood. That Invisible Girl is not legitimated as "Woman" after marriage or childbirth is infantilizing and degrading. It is not until the end of 1976 that Invisible Girl even openly contemplates changing her name to Invisible Woman, perhaps as an outward manifestation of her newfound confidence. Even then, the time is not right and she cites reasons of habit and comfort as reason to stick with "Girl" a little longer (*The Fantastic Four* #169). She is not re-named "Invisible Woman" until the early 1990s.

9. According to the U.S. Department of Labor report titled *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook* (2005), in 1975, 47.4% of mothers with children under the age of 18 worked outside the home. The number decreases as smaller segments of the population are examined according to the youngest child's age. For instance, in 1975, only 34% of women with a youngest child under the age of 3 worked outside the home.

10. In 1975, less than half of all mothers worked, even at least part time, according to Social Security Administration's statistics.

11. While it is obvious why "Invisible Girl" was named as such (she in fact names herself, using her power as her representation) it is not obvious why Professor Xavier names Jean Grey "Marvel Girl." However, the editors play on the obvious, sexual connotations (she's "marvel-ous") in #9 in 1965 in which they include a "pin-up" of the curvaceous Marvel Girl with the slogan, "No wonder they call her … Marvel Girl!" And while the other X-Men are often referred to as their nicknames while in costume, Jean Grey is usually called "Jean." Because of that, she is regularly referred to as "Jean" in this dissertation, even though her superheroine name is Marvel Girl.

12. This is not the only depiction of Jean in her domestic, apron-clad role. In *The X-Men* #18 in 1966 she again serves a table full of men when Warren's parents come to visit the school. In issue *The X-Men* #19 she warns Iceman about making a mess during his standoffish antics: "If any **ice** melts on the floor, **I'm** not mopping it up, Bobby Drake!"

13. According to the Economic Policy Institute's report in *The State of Working America*, in 1975 45.9% of white women worked outside the home, while 48.8% of black women did so. (www.epi.org)

14. Between the years of 1975–1980, through which this article focuses, Storm frolics naked in her rain three times (#101, 1976; #109, 1978; #123, 1979) and openly resents the necessity of wearing clothing twice (#109, 1978; #120, 1979).

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